



# TRAUMA AS A PLACE OF SERVICE

NATIONAL CHURCH LEADERS SUMMIT  
BIBLE HOUSE, NYC

DIANE LANGBERG, PH.D.  
DIANE LANGBERG AND ASSOCIATES  
5 MAY 2011

## A TRAUMATIZED PLANET

A tsunami in Asia, an earthquake in Haiti, and now Japan; genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia; child soldiers; wars around the world; human trafficking and relentless, systemic violence in our own inner cities — all of these events produce traumatized human beings.

In addition we have, according to Amnesty International, one in three females who are beaten or coerced into sex or otherwise abused in their lifetime. One in three — think about that statistic next time you walk through an airport or a crowded marketplace, or sit in the pews in your own church. Child sexual abuse, child marriage, and female genital mutilation cause physical and psychological harm to countless females. Girls have acid thrown in their faces for attending school; they are stoned to death for being raped. Violence is a major health and development issue for girls worldwide. Young girls are especially susceptible to HIV and in some countries the infection rates for girls are three to six times higher than for boys (Stephen Lewis, "Lend a Hand," *Globe and Mail*, 5 May 2000). Women now represent 50% of the 33 million people living with HIV/AIDS. There is also the sex trafficking of girls and women that is utterly destroying close to a million females annually as they are moved across nation boundaries and sold into virtual slavery. Sex trafficking is a brutal and large-scale destructive force of girls and women today — and it is not just over there; it is here, in our own streets and cities.

Girls and women around the world face violence every day. More girls have been killed in the last fifty years, *because they were girls*, than men were killed in all the battles of the twentieth century. Females have food withheld, medicines withheld, education withheld. And then there is the catastrophic problem of rape around the world. Rape has become endemic in the country of South Africa. In Kenya, female political candidates carry knives and wear several layers of clothing to deter rape — which is used to humiliate and discredit

them, hence keeping them from holding office. Raping is an honored tradition in Ethiopia. If you want a particular girl and think your chances are slim, you rape her, she is shamed and ruined and the rapist is granted the girl, who then has to marry her rapist.

In genocides, such as in Rwanda, rape is used to terrorize and to undermine tribal structures and dilute an ethnic strain. In Darfur, the Janjaweed militias gang-raped women of three different tribes and mutilated them to mark them as rape victims. Half the women in Sierra Leone have been raped and the UN says 90% of girls and women over the age of three were raped during that country's civil war.

Currently, eastern Congo is the rape capital of the world. A recent UN human rights panel says that hundreds of thousands have been raped during the conflict there. Rape in Congo is pervasive and one third of the victims are children and 13% are against children under the age of ten. In 2008 the United Nations declared rape as a weapon of war for the first time and a UN commander stated that it is becoming more dangerous to be female than to be a soldier in an armed conflict. According to UN accounts, in some areas three quarters of females have been raped. It is intended to disfigure and torture these women in order to terrorize the general population.

## THE GREAT TENSION

It is mind numbing, is it not? Overwhelming? These figures tell us human stories, those stories result in a horrified reaction on our part, and then most of us easily slip into some kind of denial. It seems too much and after all, what can we *really* do?

All of these things, from tsunamis to rape — things we find difficult to comprehend or hold in our minds, are endured by human beings. They also result in traumatized human beings. They live with the recurring, tormenting memories of atrocities witnessed and/or borne. It infects their sleep with horrific nightmares, destroys their relationships, their capacity to work or study, torments their emotions and shatters their faith and mutilates hope. Many are rendered mute and unmoving. Trauma is indeed extraordinary, not because it rarely happens but because it overwhelms normal human coping. It swallows up and destroys normal human ways of living

The usual response to atrocity is to try and remove it from the mind. Those who have been traumatized want to flee the memory of its occurrence and we who hear find that we want to flee also. We find it too terrible to remember and too incomprehensible to put into words. That is why we use the phrase “unspeakable atrocities.” The great tension is the futile attempt to forget the unspeakable — while it continues to live on and sometimes scream in the mind. That push-pull between the need to forget and the need to speak is the central dialectic of trauma, and that tension is not only experienced by individuals and families, but also by churches and nations. It is experienced not only by the traumatized but also by those who bear witness to the trauma.

I know something of this tension because as a psychologist I have worked for 35 years with child abuse, rape, and violence of many kinds — including combat, genocide and trafficking.

I have seen this push-pull in my patients who are terrified to remember and speak but who cannot forget. I have seen families, churches and yes, nations, deny both the existence of evil and trauma in their midst as well as its life-shaping impact. I also know this tension exists in those who bear witness. We see it on television or the internet, someone tells of an atrocity and soon after we look for ways to remove ourselves. Such stories threaten our comfort, our position or our system. The stories are vile and messy and very disruptive. Traumatized people need attention and assistance, often for a long time. The trauma stories of our families, institutions and organizations get buried and geographical distance and the push of a button enable us to do the same with entire nations.

### THIS CENTURY'S GREATEST MISSION FIELD

We are, however, the church. That means we are the body of Jesus Christ and He is our Head. In the physical realm, a body that does not follow its head is a sick body. That is also true in the spiritual realm. We are His people and I believe with all my heart He has called us to go out of ourselves and follow Him into the suffering of this world bearing His character and His Word. And we do go — we send missionaries and the Scriptures; we provide food, clean water, education and jobs for many. And we should. We have rarely, however, seen trauma as a place of service. If we think carefully about the extensive natural disasters in our time such as earthquakes, hurricanes and tsunamis, and combine those victims with the many manmade disasters — the violent inner cities, wars, genocides, trafficking, rapes, and child abuse — we would have a staggering number. I believe that if we would stop and look out on suffering humanity we would begin to realize that trauma is perhaps the greatest mission field of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

You see, trauma does not heal apart from being spoken and it needs to be heard in the context of a safe relationship where the dignity of the one who has been crushed is restored. That means we have to go, we have to listen, be present to the truth of the evil, impacted by it and respond with honor and love. But is that not in fact what our Lord did for us? He left glory and came down to this traumatized world. And oh, how He listened as He became flesh like us; He literally got in our skin. He was fully present to the truth of this planet and was eternally impacted by its evil and suffering. He sat with us and bestowed honor to crushed human beings and reached out in love. He did not flee the atrocities of our world or of our hearts. He is in fact, the Crucified One; the traumatized one.

Work with the traumatized will not fit easily into neat programs. There is no quick success. The numbers are not astounding but one by one. But it is the way our Lord went and we have been called into partnership with the Crucified One. I long for the church of Jesus Christ to capture this vision. Traumatized people are desperate. The doors are open and they are starving for help for their minds and souls.

The key is to let ourselves truly see the vast need and not flee the atrocities and the devastated lives. Then we need to go and teach indigenous trainers so we raise up an army of people who know and love our God, who also understand trauma and how to be present in flesh and blood and respond in healing ways. We would gift the church worldwide if we

listened to their stories and taught them how to help others whose lives have been rocked by traumatic events. Rwanda, Congo, Burundi, Southern Sudan are all asking for help with trauma. Bosnia, Romania, and Serbia — Haiti and the Dominican Republic — the list goes on. They are asking for the people of God to face the truth of the atrocities in the lives of their brothers and sisters, to listen and sit with them and bear their sorrow. Pastors and leaders around the globe are pleading for training so they can comfort and shepherd their own traumatized flocks.

## TRUTH-TELLING

Elie Wiesel said this: “I swore never to be silent wherever and whenever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

Several years ago I stood before a plaque in the genocide memorial in Kigali, Rwanda. Following the definition of genocide is the list of those things that are punishable as genocide. Number five on the list is complicity. The word literally has to do with folding together. It means to be an accomplice; a partner in wrongdoing. To be silent about the number of traumatized human beings in this world is to be folded up together with those who carry out violence.

As the church of Jesus Christ we are witnesses to the truth. Yes, that means speaking boldly about the God who came in the flesh to redeem broken humanity. But it also means speaking the truth *about that brokenness* and calling evil by its right name. A truth-teller disturbs, alerts, wakens and warns against indifference to injustice and complacency about the needs of human beings. The world knew what was happening in Germany in the 1930's — and remained silent. The world knew about the Warsaw ghetto and Auschwitz and remained silent. The world knew about the genocide in Rwanda and remained silent.

We know now that Haitians are not okay; the Rwandans are not okay; the Congolese are not okay. *Silence is not a virtue; it is a vice two times compounded for it contains both indifference to the victims and complicity with the destroyers.* Trauma is a vast mission field. I believe it is *the mission field of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.* Global trauma **is** the voice of our Savior calling to us to follow Him in the fellowship of His sufferings. The question before the church is: will she go?

## WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

Many centuries ago — twenty to be exact — baby girls were considered a liability. Female infanticide was not uncommon. Infant girls, often considered the equivalent of deformed, were killed by exposure. In essence, it was permitted by law to leave them outside the city on the dung heap to die. I daresay dying on a dung heap as a helpless child is a traumatic experience.

There was, however, a group of people who refused to accept the culture's assessment regarding the value of those lives, so they went outside the city to the dung heaps to find and rescue the abandoned babies. They did not simply drift along, complicit with the values of their own society. Their decision was both risky and sacrificial. It required standing against the mainstream and making a judgment that ran counter to their culture. It meant the giving of life, time and goods to a discarded child. It meant extending the circle of one's personal responsibility. It meant being devalued and disdained by that society for stooping so low as to treat that which was deemed worthless, as precious instead.

Who were these people? They were the church of the first century. The people of God went outside the gates to the garbage heaps of those days to pursue those from whom others fled or ignored. They went to the dung heaps in the Name of Christ — the one who sought us out when we were on the dung heap and traumatized by both sin and suffering — seeking us as though we were some piece of precious gold in the sewer. The church of that century simply did for others what had been done for them by God himself.

The call that was answered by our first century brethren is not unlike a call that now sits before us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. The question that remains to be answered is whether or not we too will go outside our ordinary parameters to pursue those discarded on the dung heaps of this world and sacrificially work among them.

We are called as Christians to hallow the name of God. To hallow the name of Christ is to reverence His character, to defend His honor and to obey His authority. One of the major tests of hallowing the Divine name is that of our attitude towards our fellow human beings. Injustice on the part of human beings toward other human beings is a profanation of the Name of God. Complicity in injustice is also a profanation of that peerless Name. To profane means to wound; to erode and to render common. Will we, the church of this century hold His name hallowed? Or will we flee from atrocities and wound our Savior yet again?

One of the supreme opportunities before the church today to hallow the name of our God is created by those who have been traumatized around the globe. May we, like our Lord, be full of his spirit, bringing good news to the afflicted, comforting the broken-hearted and grieving, and proclaiming freedom to captives so that He may be glorified, His name hallowed and His kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

“Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did so to one of my children, *even the least of them*, you did it to me”.